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ABSTRACT

Test anxiety is a common problem manifested by many college students. The Testing and Psychological Services Center at Northern Kentucky University sees a number of such students each semester. The possible causes of test anxiety are frequently the illogical or unrealistic demands that some students place on themselves. The methods of treatment used at Northern Kentucky University include: academic contracting, enhancement of study skills, academic and vocational guidance, and systematic desensitization of anxiety. Particular emphasis is placed on the utilization of Rational-Emotive Therapy (RET) for overcoming test anxiousness. RET emphasizes the interrelationships between our belief system and our emotions. (Eight irrational beliefs about testing are presented, followed by the rational arguments which may be used to challenge these beliefs.) (Author/GDC)

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Rationally Dealing With Test Anxiety

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Test anxiety is a common problem manifested by many college students. The Testing and Psychological Services Center at Northern Kentucky University sees a number of such students each semester. The possible causes for test anxiety are explored; in particular, the illogical or unrealistic demands that some students place on themselves are described. The methods of treatment used at Northern Kentucky University are outlined including; academic contracting, study skills enhancement, academic and vocational guidance, and systematic desensitization. Particular emphasis is placed on the utilization of Rational-Emotive Therapy for overcoming test anxiousness. The basic principles of Rational-Emotive Therapy are presented with emphasis on the interrelationship between our belief system and our emotions.

Rationally Dealing With Test Anxiety

Our society is heavily test-oriented. Individuals are tested to determine their intellectual level, their personality characteristics, and their aptitudes. Tests are used to determine knowledge in school courses and to determine if one can even get in some courses or programs of study. Vocational interests and skills are evaluated by tests. We pass, fail, are promoted, or are sometimes detained as the result of our test scores.

Tests and the taking of tests have become anxiety-provoking elements for many, many people in our culture. A number of such individuals visit the Testing and Psychological Services Center at Northern Kentucky University each semester. Some are young, but the majority seem to be older men and women who are entering college for the first time. Many of these persons have been out of high school for a number of years and actually have no recent experiences studying or taking tests. Most of the people who complain of test anxiety relate such symptoms as: 1) an inability to think clearly when confronted with test material, 2) a total blocking of thoughts, 3) rapidly beating heart, 4) a feeling that the classroom is "closing in" on them, 5) extreme nervousness 6) feelings of inadequacy and an inability to compete, or even 7) episodes of fainting.

Causes Of Test Anxiety

Northern Kentucky University is an open admissions institution, and undoubtedly some students are not capable of successfully competing

at the college level. A combination of inadequate intellectual ability and personal frustration regarding poor academic performances can easily lead one to view test-taking as a traumatic experience. However, other students simply have faulty and inefficient study habits which help promote test anxiety because they have not systematically prepared adequately for testing. Unfortunately, some individuals display excellent systematic study techniques, but all their hard work is destroyed by test anxiety which prevents a valid measure of their knowledge. This type of test anxiety is probably precipitated in many cases by students making unrealistic demands upon themselves. Finally, others make unrealistic demands upon themselves, but they also manifest poor study skills.

The anxiety-provoking, unrealistic demands that are encountered often include the following:

1. I must be perfect in my work or achieve perfect scores on my tests.

2. A good test performance is never good enough, I must do better or I should have performed better.

3. If I have an important examination facing me, I must preoccupy my mind with thoughts about that examination to the exclusion of other thoughts or problems.

4. If I fail my test, the experience will be the worse thing that has ever happened to me.

5. I never did well on tests, and I know that I will not do well on this one.

6. Isn't it awful or horrible that I must take tests?

7. I am a victim in this educational system; I really am not in control.

8. If I fail a test, then I am a failure, or if I pass a test, I am a success.

Thus, clients who visit the Testing and Psychological Services Center tend to primarily manifest one of the following: a) inadequate intellectual ability or preparation for college-level work; b) poor study habits; c) good study habits but one or more of the illogical beliefs previously outlined, or d) poor study habits plus one or more faulty beliefs.

Methods Of Dealing With Test Anxiety

The main brunt of our therapeutic procedures focuses on an analysis and possibly a modification of the student's study procedures and/or an analysis and hopefully a modification of the student's belief system. Initially, students are superficially evaluated regarding their intellectual and academic capabilities. Those students considered to be possibly headed toward academic difficulty generally are counseled and given both academic and vocational guidance. Those who are not overly-threatened by non-academic tests may also take certain tests specifically related to intellectual functioning, aptitudes, academic interests, and/or vocational interests. Some men and women who are not progressing satisfactorily but who are determined to continue, may be asked to agree to an academic contract. This contract is jointly devised by the student, the Registrar's Office, and the Office of Testing and Psychological Services. Inability to successfully fulfill the provisions of the agreed upon contract then would result in academic suspension or probation.

Other students manifest very poor study skills and habits. Such individuals are given some guidance regarding the proper scheduling of

their time and the process of systematically dealing with material to be studied. In order to reinforce this guidance, a booklet entitled, A Rational Approach To Improving College Grades (Rogers, 1977), is given to each student-client. This short booklet was purposefully written in understandable language to quickly and easily assist the troubled student.

Those men and women who demonstrate an irrational or illogical belief system are given a booklet which deals with the basics of Rational-Emotive Therapy, entitled You and Your Emotions (Maultsby & Hendricks, 1974). This booklet serves as a background and prelude for intensive personal counseling geared toward a rational analysis of the student's belief system. This theory is based upon the pioneering work of Albert Ellis, and it relates well to many academically-troubled students. The theory, which is outlined well in A New Guide To Rational Living (Ellis & Harper, 1975), holds that each of us is personally responsible for our reactions, actions, or lack of actions. Emotions are said to be shaped by our belief system which may reflect either rational or irrational thoughts. Rational thoughts are defined roughly as those which are valid, self-preserving, pleasure-producing, self-promoting, or growth-oriented. Irrational thoughts would be broadly defined as those thoughts which are self-destructive, dogmatic, intolerant, hate-oriented, illogical, or untrue. The anatomy of an emotion is thus outlined in the following manner:

A. Your perceptions (what you see, hear, feel, etc.)

B. Your thoughts (only the ones you believe which may be either rational or irrational)

C. Your Emotional feelings (a gut level reaction caused by your thoughts)

Therefore, if one is about to encounter a test (A) and his/her thoughts are shaped and influenced by an irrational belief system (B), then the logical gut level reation (C) would probably be panic or anxiety. Therapy in these cases focuses on analyzing thoughts as to: 1) their validity; 2) whether or not they help that person get what he/she wants, 3) whether or not the thoughts keep the individual out of bothersome or troubling situations; and 4) whether or not the thoughts keep the student from feeling differently than desired.

Eight irrational beliefs concerning tests and test taking that students frequently are plagued by were just presented. The eight irrational beliefs are presented again with some rational challenges that might be used to assist students in breaking down such irrational ideas:

1. I must be perfect in my work or achieve perfect scores on my tests. Implying that this situation is a "must" also implies that one might not survive if perfection is not reached. However, the primary error with this demand is the quest for perfection. Certainly, some actions or behaviors that we manifest are perfect (a perfect golf shot, a perfect spelling score, etc.), but by and large our actions are laced with some errors. No one is perfect. The problem arises when the perfectionist considers a 92% or a 98% performance as failure or unsatisfactory. In particular, the perfectionist promotes anxiety in the pursuit of perfection. A more realistic goal would be for the student to strive for the best possible performance

that he or she can achieve.

2. When the perfection-striving student achieves a satisfactory score, he or she may even berate the performance by stating, "I should have obtained a higher score." The person's performance is never satisfactory. The student cannot enjoy or be proud of his or her performance. Ellis and Harper (1975) proclaim that we all "should" on ourselves too much. We generally cannot change history; we can only accept it and learn from it.

3. If I have an important examination facing me, I must preoccupy my mind with thoughts about that examination to the exclusion of other thoughts or problems. For some students, a pending examination is thought to be the most important experience facing them. Other aspects of their lives may desperately suffer. This constant mental exercise frequently does not focus on positive experiences or success but rather on errors and expected anxiousness. Just as one can mentally practice anxiety-free behaviors via reciprocal inhibition, one can also mentally practice errors and inappropriate anxiety.

4. If I fail my test, the experience will be the worse thing that has ever happened to me. Some students really believe this. Certainly there are some calamities or catastrophes in life which might be slightly more anxiety-provoking than a poor test grade. In this case, the test or examination becomes bigger than life.

5. I never did well on tests, and I know that I will not do well on this one. Could this be the development of a "self-fulfilling" prophesy? Past behavior can be a predictor of future behavior, but this situation is not always valid. Past behaviors are gone and cannot be changed. The individual allows himself or herself to be or not to be affected by certain past experiences. In fact, if one knows for certain that their test performance will be deficient, then why bother to study.
6. Isn't it awful or horrible that I must take tests? This belief implies that one absolutely cannot control the situation and that one is a unique victim. All a person need do is look about his or her college campus and observe other victims of tests, many of whom are not experiencing debilitating test trauma. Also, the test-anxious student realistically can control this situation. He or she can quit college. If this solution is not acceptable, then one must accept reality and find methods to deal with the problem.
7. The previous irrational belief relates directly to the following illogical idea. I am a victim in this educational system; I really am not in control. In other words, the student believes that external pressures or forces directly account for his or her unhappiness rather than illogical thought processes about external

problems. In essence, one sees such students' states of mind directly correlated with their circumstances. When circumstances are good (perhaps no tests), life is grand. When circumstances are bad (perhaps a test is scheduled), life is gloomy. Once again, the student's belief system about the circumstances encountered promotes that student's approach or emotional reaction to the scheduled testing. One student may somewhat nervously look forward to the testing as a chance to improve his or her overall class scores and show the professor that he or she is knowledgeable about the course. While another student may be so traumatized that he or she cannot stop thinking about how awful testing is, how unfair life is, how poorly he or she does on tests, and probably how failure is expected. The student is most surely in control of his or her emotions. It simply is more convenient and takes less personal work for growth to cast blame on the environment. If the environment is blamed, then the student can rationalize and state that nothing can be done. However, many techniques can be used to overcome this problem situation, but that takes personal effort, risk, and possible failure. So much energy is expended "awfulizing", that little seems available to really work on problems.

8. If I fail the test, then I am a failure, or if I pass a test, I am a success. The student and his or her test scores ought not to be equated. A poor score on a test does not indicate that the student is an inadequate person, failure in life, stupid, or incompetent. Just as a "straight A" average does not necessarily indicate that that individual is well-adjusted, will be a great success in life, is brilliant, or competent. A poor test score only indicates that the student was not adequately prepared, did not meet the teacher's expectation, did not understand the questions on the test, or performed poorly because of test anxiety.

One can surely see that if a person's belief system is shaped by one or more of the eight irrational or illogical beliefs just outlined then the experience of testing and tests will probably be viewed in a most distorted way.

Even though some or maybe all of the previously described methods of treatment may be applied with certain persons, some students continue to feel anxious or uptight and just have difficulty relaxing. With such student-clients, relaxation training may be utilized (Bernstein & Borkovec, 1973). The student initially learns how to systematically relax muscle groups via therapeutic instruction, and later he/she learns how to induce deep muscle relaxation as needed. Coupled with this technique, some students have been encouraged to utilize Rational

Emotive Imagery (Maultsby & Hendricks, 1974). This is the Rational-Emotive Therapy version of desensitization to anxiety-provoking situations. While in a relaxed state, the individual mentally pictures himself/herself in an anxiety-provoking situation, all-the-while challenging the irrational thoughts attached to this anxiety-provoking situation. If relaxation gives way to anxiety, then the Rational Emotive Imagery is stopped. The student calms down again by utilizing the relaxation training and then starts the imagery again. After the anxiety-provoking situation can be consistently mentally pictured free of anxiety then the individual pictures himself/herself acting in a very rational manner in this same anxiety-provoking situation. The student is encouraged to practice this procedure three or four times everyday.

Conclusion

This exposition was not intended to imply that college administrators, professors, or counselors should take students' claims of test anxiety lightly. Test anxiety does exist, and it can be dealt with in a variety of ways. College personnel probably should evaluate claims of test anxiety from three standpoints: 1) the student's intellectual ability, 2) the study skills and methods utilized, and 3) the student's belief system regarding tests and the taking of tests.

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